



# Catholic Medical Quarterly

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## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN DR PRAVIN THEVATHASAN AND FRANCIS ETHEREDGE.

Questions and Answers on the forthcoming book by Francis Etheredge,  
*Human Nature: Moral Norm*, from En Route Books and Media:  
<https://enroutebooksandmedia.com/humannature/>.

### INTRODUCTION



Francis is a Catholic married layman, father of 11 children, 3 of whom are in heaven, and an author. *Human Nature: Moral Norm* has been written over many years and undergone a considerable number of changes which, in the end, he hopes gives a variety of answers to the question of how we are to understand the relationship between human nature and the moral norms that proceed from the whole person. Just, then, as light and warmth arise out of a fire in the hearth of a home, so the specific principle of "being open to life" emerges out of the spousal, reciprocal gift of self, and unfolds the possibility of family life.

However, in replying to the objection that "being open to life" is an imposition on human beings, Francis has explored the different ways that we can understand the dynamic whole of the married man and woman.

The opening chapters address an explanation of how the truth of being human is instantiated in the whole human person and that, therefore, there is a metaphysical argument that the truth of the moral norm, "be open to life", proceeds from the person as a whole and is expressed, as it were, in the coherent detail of every part acting together for the good of the spouses. The book explores, too, both the many contributions of human experience, including the author's own, as well as drawing on the word of God to enable us to understand, more "relationally", the mystery of the human person, male and female, made in the image of God, the Blessed Trinity, the source and goal of human life.

The following questions and answers are an attempt to introduce, by dialogue, the dynamic out of which the book, *Human Nature: Moral Norm*, arises; and, at the same time, to help orientate the reader with what can be, at times, a difficult read.

#### **Firstly: Why have I argued that 'being open to life is being open to relationships'?**

Essentially, there is a three-fold dialogue in the nature of the marital vocation to be open to life: this dialogue intimately concerns the husband, his wife and their "marriage in Christ". In other words, beyond the consideration of the serious reasons that the Church recognizes for deferring the possibility of conceiving a child (cf. *Humanae Vitae*, 10), there is the positive reason that being open to life is being open to the life of a child; and, as the relationship to a child is both temporal and eternal, it seems that



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...entails an openness of the spouses to God: to their relationship to God - not as a master but as a minister of the whole gift of marriage (cf. *Humanae Vitae*, 8, 13). Furthermore, just as the dialogue of love between husband and wife concerns the possibility of the conception of each child, so their dialogue with God encompasses and embraces the whole of marriage and the unfolding of the parents' relationship to their children. In other words, parents entrusting themselves lovingly to the help of providence no less involves the whole life of the marriage (cf. John, 2: 1-12), just as it involves the conception of a child and the unfolding of all that is entailed in parenthood.

Why does this seem so difficult to understand? Because we are neither used to thinking philosophically about the persistent existence of the human soul after death, which also points to a kind of "natural foundation" to the resurrection, nor are we converted by faith to the possibility of the resurrection of the body and eternal life. By contrast, contraception and abortion express, in their very mentality, a denial of relationship: a denial of relationship in the three, aforementioned ways: of fatherhood, motherhood, and of a child being an expression of the same everlasting love that brought the parents into existence and to marriage!

At the same time, there is a sense in which we are called, naturally, as social creatures, to communicate with each other. From our Baptism, bearing in our hearts there is the impulse of the Gospel, to announce the love of God to others. So "being open to life" takes "life" to mean more than being conceived, but indeed being conceived in the love of God and called to the conversion that seeks to announce the love of God to all. In other words, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, grace builds on nature; and, therefore, the life of faith that the parents live is the basis of what they have to communicate to their children, disposing them to accept the transmission of faith, orchestrated by God, but to which the parents are called to contribute too.

**Secondly: You believe that the moral norms are intrinsic to our nature. They are not imposed on us. Why is this distinction so important?**

One of the principal objections to the norm, that the marital act must entail an inseparable connection between 'the unitive significance and procreative significance ... [of] the marriage act' (*Humanae Vitae*, 12), is that the Church is "canonizing" a biological reality: that the Church is making a biological reality a moral norm. Whereas by arguing that the moral norm of being open to life arises out of the nature of man, male and female, as expressed in marriage, we can see that the vision of marriage that the Church clarifies for us expresses the deepest reality of the reciprocal self-gift between husband and wife. In other words, if a married couple interrogate their own reality, they will discover that they embody, in the very nature of their marriage, the inseparable connection between the "Persons" of the Blessed Trinity: each "Person being open to the other". Thus, in marriage, this "openness" of spouse to spouse is an expression of the life-giving nature of love.

Moreover, to discover that "being open to life" arises out of the very deepest expression of marriage, is to discover that the vocation to marriage draws on the whole of man, male and female, that God expressed in creating man, male and female; and, therefore, "being open to life" entails as profound a fulfilment of the vocation to be married as the grace of God is indispensable to its perfection.

**Thirdly: The self-giving of man and woman in the marital act should be total in its openness to life. How does this make NFP morally acceptable?**



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On the other hand, the application of Natural Family Planning in marriage is a question of understanding the relationship between the discovery of the fertile and infertile periods in the wife's cycle and the moral use of this knowledge. In the first place, however, in that Natural Family Planning retains the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative significance of the marital act and, indeed, even confirms this through psychological studies of the beneficial dialogue between husband and wife that it promotes, it follows that there is no intrinsic obstacle to the use of it in marriage. Furthermore, the knowledge derived generally, and in the particular cases of each marriage, is beneficial to the spouses in determining when there is a favourable time for the conception of a child. Knowing all this, though, does not trample upon the nature of the child-as-gift; and, therefore, it may be that the suffering of infertility has to be embraced and the mission of the marriage in the service of life sought in another kind of work to that of directly bringing children into the world.

Moreover, if there is no 'serious reason' for recourse to the infertile period, in so far as it can be known, then there is the possibility of sin: the tendency to deliberately seek a selfish way of life which, in practice, excludes this openness to children from the marriage. If, then, that is the case, there is the presence of a contraceptive mentality and the danger of this impacting on the "unforeseen" gift of a child. In other words, there is a danger to the life a child conceived, unforeseen, and thus the contraceptive use of Natural Family Planning already, in itself, contradicts the inseparability of the unitive and procreative significance of the marital act. Indeed, C.S. Lewis, an Anglican lay preacher, observed this to a friend of his, Sheldon Vanauken, who married and yet deliberately avoided the possibility of children, choosing to work to live in an "encapsulated" marriage, as it were, while living on board a boat and sailing as much as possible rather than founding a family.

Intrinsically, what makes Natural Family Planning acceptable in both its natural expression and according to the teaching of the Catholic Church is that if it is accepted for what it is, 'a secure base for the chaste regulation of children' (Pius XII), then it follows that 'chaste', here, refers to the purity of the spousal intention. In other words, even if there is a good reason for spouses to avail themselves of the infertile period, that the marriage act retains its nature as both unitive and procreative. Thus, even if, in principle and in practice, a child is not intended, but is nevertheless conceived, then that child will be welcomed as the gift of God he or she is. In other words, a serious reason for avoiding the conception of a child is distinct from rejecting the gift of a child if God gives a boy or a girl nevertheless. Moreover, this knowledge can help the parents conceive and, at the same time, draw on what helps during times of illness and other serious problems while, when possible, preserving marital communion and communication. More deeply, however, the very nature of "being open to life" is itself a psycho-spiritual mentality embedded in the very nature of the interpenetration of the physical and the psychological, interpersonal love between husband and wife. Therefore, in its very inner structure, the fullest expression of spousal love that spousal lovers naturally seek, in expressing their love of each other, is that ecstatic love which goes beyond themselves because of the help of God.

#### **Fourthly: Why is it so important to say that there is no conflict between the moral norm of "being open to life" and the human person?**

As we progress through these questions it becomes apparent that there is an implicit, psychological structure to spousal love. Spousal love calls, as it does, for communication, self-control, continence at times, consideration of each expression of love [4]. In other words, to enter more deeply into marriage entails an education, a "drawing out", of what is naturally the inner meaning and structure of marital union; and, therefore, it is in accordance with both the natural order of both the husband and the wife



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of a thriving family life. Furthermore, this commitment of family life entails encompassing others in ways which are integral to family life, whether visiting the elderly and sharing the experience of generations, opening up the dinner table to the unmarried, elderly, widowed, or any number of relatively modest services to life.

## **Fifthly: Is Christ and His Church implicated in the providential details of life?**

In Pope Francis' recent comments on dialogue, he says, "The word "dialogue" etymologically means "through the word" (November 6th, 2023, Papal Address to a Delegation of European Rabbis). Thus Christian marriage cannot be separated from the whole of the Christian life and, indeed, both draws from it and contributes to it, as indeed the family contributes to society and, eventually, do the adult children. But the word of God is indispensable to understanding the difficulties of marriage, family life and the multiple possibilities of talents and vocations. As we see, then, in the papal works concerning marriage, whether it be *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, or *Amoris Laetitia*, there is a concrete relationship to the Church, the sacraments and the word of God. In the particular case of this author and his family, the vocation to marriage has been helped in many and various ways throughout our formation in the Neocatechumenal Way, approved from the time of Pope St. Paul VI but especially in the time of St. John Paul II, with the approval of the Statutes and the scrutiny of its rites and catecheses. In other words, we are called to see the action of God in the practicalities of illness, unemployment, qualifications, opportunities, homelessness and indeed all the vicissitudes and victories of the events throughout marriage and family life.

We are both psychological and social beings and so our spiritual life is both intimately personal and expressed in the liturgical life of the Church.

## **Finally, a question concerning Pope Francis: God has given us this present pope; and, therefore, he is integral to our present experience of the Church.**

**'However, the pope has praised an Italian abortionist, Emma Bonino, as a great politician. He met the American nun Jeannine Gramick and the pro-abortion celebrity around the time of the Synod on Synodality. He made Cardinal Hollerich the relator general of the synod, even though Hollerich has said the teaching of the Church on homosexuality is "no longer correct." So, I understand why some Catholics are expressing their concerns. Any thoughts?'**

It is essential to take account of Pope Francis' belief in dialogue, espoused in various places, including the recent address to the synod. Thus I am of the opinion that while we can regard these actions as "causing confusion", I think that Pope Francis is not intending the confusion that results from his actions; remember the adage, "after does not necessarily mean because of". In other words, Pope Francis is addressing the person who holds these opinions, rather than the opinions themselves. In other words, it may be that public perception "fastens" on to the opinions of these people but overlooks the possibility that Pope Francis brings the person who holds them close so that they can experience a dialogue that may help them. Bearing in mind, too, that Pope Francis, like a number of recent popes, holds to the power of the word of God to disrupt and unsettle our otherwise erroneous beliefs [5]. Thus, in a recent statement to a delegation of Rabbis from Europe, Pope Francis said:

*"The word "dialogue" etymologically means "through the word". The Word of the Most High is the light that illumines the paths of life (cf. Ps 119:105): it directs our own steps to the search for our neighbour, to acceptance and to patience; certainly not to the brusque passion of vengeance and*



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neighbour'. What we have, then, is an expression of the "priority of the person" in the actions of Pope Francis and, as such, an expression of the Gospel mandate to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

'Pope Francis evaluates reality through the person or, again, he puts the person first, and thereby he evaluates reality. What counts is the person, the rest comes as a logical consequence.

And the person has value in himself, regardless of the reason for his structural peculiarities or his moral condition' [7].

Indeed, it becomes obvious, sometimes, that Don Bosco's advice about the care of children applies also to adults: that oftentimes it is better to pray and to say less than to burden another with great exhortations than may in fact wound rather than heal.

In a word, it is of our faith to understand, charitably, the actions of another. In the action, then, of drawing a person close, literally, who might otherwise be "far away", Pope Francis is taking those steps through which he hopes to bring a person closer to the dialogue 'through the word' which is what will ultimately help him or her. As regards the Gospel, then, if God regarded our sins only, who would He address? In the calling of the woman caught in adultery, Christ addresses the woman, in addressing her: "Go and sin no more" (cf. Jn 8: 11). And the word of Christ is a word of power, bringing about what He says; and, as such, this is the word, as I explain in many places, that followed my own conversion and started to ready me for marriage twenty seven years ago!

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Pater Edmund Waldstein OCist, "Bonum est diffusivum sui"  
<https://sancrucensis.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/bonum-est-diffusivum-sui/>.
2. Fr. Thomas More Barba, OP, "Bonum Diffusivum Sui Est":  
<https://dominicanvocations.com/news/bonum-diffusivum-sui-est-january-13-2019>.
3. Paraphrased by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, 24, drawing on Pius XII th's address to the Family Campaign in 1951; however, as many know, there are many other features to the nature of abstinence, including the effect of breastfeeding etc. Thus it is an open question how ancient, in fact, this knowledge is. The issue, however, is not just what we know, intuitively and by experience or more scientifically, but the moral nature of the application of this knowledge.
4. Cf. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, which includes a discussion on the marital act.
5. Cf. *Human Nature: Moral Norm*, Chapter Seven, pp. 411
6. Monday, 6th November, 2023, "ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO A DELEGATION OF THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN RABBIS:  
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/november/documents/20231106-european-rabbis.html>
7. CARDINAL FRANCESCO , COCCOPALMERIO AND ANDREW GUERNSEY, May 1st, 2017, "Chapter Eight of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia":  
<https://www.hprweb.com/2017/05/chapter-eight-of-the-post-synodal-apostolic-exhortation-amoris-laetitia/>; cf. also a discussion of this in Francis Etheredge, *The Family on Pilgrimage: God*